

Codrin ANICULĂESE  
Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University  
Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
codrin.aniculaese@stud.ubbcluj.ro

**PERSISTENT PATTERN, SIGNIFICANT FORM: REDEMPTIVE  
ARTIFICIALITY IN WILLIAM GADDIS' *THE RECOGNITIONS***

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to trace in William Gaddis' 1955 *The Recognitions* a celebration of artificiality which prefigures a radical post-structural theory. I initially survey early criticism of Gaddis' novel, in an attempt to highlight the inadequacies of modernist interpretations of the text. Subsequently, a specific type of postmodern reading of *The Recognitions* is considered, which ultimately is shown to fall short of capitalizing on some of the novel's key passages. In the latter half of the article, I draw on Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* in order to configure a post-structural reading of Gaddis' novel that, unlike the former interpretative frames, affirms the value of artificiality exactly as it is given. Finally, such a celebration of artificiality is traced both in conceptual developments throughout the text, as well as in the novel's own literary mechanisms which intimate a sense of value and transcendence present even in fake constructs.

**Keywords:** *The Recognitions*, Gaddis, artificiality, modernism, post-structuralism, redemption.

Recognize what, exactly? A sensible question to ask of William Gaddis' first novel, published in 1955. A sensible question which, nonetheless, tantalizingly resists definitive clarification. *The Recognitions* is a Gargantuan novel, a behemoth of post-war American

literature as well as a trailblazer<sup>1</sup> for it, in which precisely recognition of anything at all—be it narrative thread, structural consistency, or even the protagonist himself, more absent than not, more of an intimation lurking outside the text than a unifying principle dominating it—is withheld from us. Throughout the last half century, the novel’s few readers and even fewer critics have largely labelled it a transitional text<sup>2</sup>, one which treads the fine line that is late modernism and which, simultaneously, teeters on the edge of postmodernism. There is good reason for such a liminal classification. Though *The Recognitions* is one of those texts of which a summary is impossible, it can be argued that Gaddis’ main concern here is with the categories of the real and of the fake, as well as with a consumerist, capitalist culture of the counterfeit which thoroughly blurs the distinction between the two. With respect to such a concern, earlier critics of Gaddis<sup>3</sup> have argued the novel to configure a quest precisely for that lost capacity for distinction. Adopting what I will later identify as a modernist frame, they insist on the text’s redemptive quality—that is, on its capacity to recognize the authentic and to cast away the artificial. Conversely, more recent readings<sup>4</sup> of *The Recognitions*, which loosely fit the categories of philosophical post-structuralism and cultural postmodernism, champion the novel’s dissolution of such stable, traditional concepts, focusing on its entropic character and identifying its recognitions as ones of loss, of the absence of an original truth. One view is traditional, reactionary, aiming to recover a lost something. The other is progressive, looking forward to a world in conceptual ruin. Certainly, both can be traced somewhere in this novel which, through a delicate exercise in balance, looks back and forward at the same time. However, neither interpretation does enough

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<sup>1</sup> For a historical, cultural, as well as conceptual analysis of Gaddis’ impact on a new age of post-war American fiction, see Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (Harpercollins, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> All of the critical interpretations surveyed in this article have made this argument, from Salemi and Koenig’s early readings, to Cunningham’s Gnostic lens in the 1980’s, Johnston’s postmodernist reading in the 1990’s, and finally to Wilkens’ more recent 2010 study.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter William Koenig, “Recognizing Gaddis’ *Recognitions*,” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter), 1975, pp. 61-72; Joseph S. Salemi, “To Soar in Atonement: Art as Expiation in Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*,” in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 10, No 2 (Winter), 1977, pp. 127-136; and Rodger Cunningham, “WHEN YOU SEE YOURSELF: Gnostic Motifs and Their Transformation in *The Recognitions*,” in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Winter), 1988, pp. 619-637.

<sup>4</sup> See John Johnston, *Carnival of Repetition: Gaddis’ The Recognitions and Postmodern Theory* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); and Matthew Wilkens, “Nothing as He Thought It Would Be: William Gaddis and American Postwar Fiction,” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Fall), 2010, pp. 596-628.

justice to the text. Neither of the two capitalizes on the text's truly prophetic capacity, on a recognition more contemporary, more radical.

The fundamental movement in Gaddis' *The Recognitions* is one of return. Not a return to something previously lost, nor a return configured as a discovery of something more deeply entrenched in the fabric of life. Instead, it is a return understood as recognition of what was always already there: the surface level, the inauthentic, and the counterfeit. In recognizing the value and validity of superficiality, Gaddis' novel engenders a re-cognition<sup>5</sup> of artificiality, whereby a life-affirming, energetic principle is found to inhabit even the fake and the second-rate. Or, as the novel brilliantly and trenchantly puts it, whereby "no love is lost" (Gaddis 432). The aim of this article is to argue precisely this. That nothing is ever lost to artificiality, and that no movement away from it is necessary—in the modernist direction of reappropriating a more authentic sense of life, or in the postmodernist path of collapse, deconstruction, and deterritorialization of either the counterfeit or the 'real' form. Such, I will attempt to show, is the extent of Gaddis' core recognition—a return to the persistent patterns of artificiality, wherein redemption lies.

In order to support all of the above, this article will initially sketch a brief outline of both modernist and postmodernist readings of *The Recognitions*, with a view to emphasizing each one's failure to take account of the text's final, culminating moment of return, later to be discussed. At the same time, within all of these interpretations, I will attempt to trace faint intimations of an alternative frame, one which I will subsequently dedicate the latter half of the article to. In configuring this alternative reading, this essay will draw on J. F. Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, to then explore the mechanisms and implications of the novel's decisive act of return—all with the purpose of highlighting everything that underlies Gaddis' deceptively simple words: "no love is lost" (Gaddis 432).

Early readings of *The Recognitions* in the 1970's considered the novel to be a programmatically modernist work. 'Modernism,' though certainly not reducible to this alone, is here understood as an artistic response to a rapidly changing world, no longer capable of sustaining traditional means of relating to it. From this perspective, the

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow this term from Benesch's 2018 analysis of repetition in *The Recognitions*: "Gaddis' novel sets out to redefine the concept of repetition as re-cognition; that is, as a second cognition" (Benesch 132).

project of a modernist work would be to reappropriate such a means, by formulating novel artistic expressions. It is a matter, then, of rediscovering, through art, what truth and authenticity entail in a new age which appears to have lost track of them. If, for such criticism, the American cultural landscape contemporary to Gaddis is mediocre, hollowed out by so many capitalist, consumerist practices, then the entire point of this novel is to provide an aesthetic medicine, an alternative way of living authentically which would ideally gather up the shattered pieces of everyday experience into one coherent, meaningful whole. As Salemi writes in their 1977 study, “the world of shallow art and intellectual falsity which throughout *The Recognitions* is parodied and attacked [...]. What this world lacks most, from the vantage point of Wyatt’s art, is dignity. The self-possessed privacy of genuine recognition” (Salemi 6). It is the task of art to redeem from the false, and, for the better part of the novel, this certainly seems in line with Wyatt, the protagonist’s creative struggles—and struggles they are. In line with modernist views of artistic ideals as always incomplete, Wyatt never quite manages to fully express the lost meanings, the obscured, authentic forms of life. Of his early paintings, the novel tells that “only those which were copies were finished. The original works left off at that moment where pattern is conceived but not executed, the forms known to the author but their place daunted, still unfound in the dignity of design” (Gaddis 56). The novel’s beginning thus seems to open up a narrative pattern easily recognizable as modernist. Throughout the text, Wyatt, the quintessential artist, is expected to progress, refining his creative capacities to the point that a monumental epiphany emerges. As if to confirm such an expectation, Gaddis litters his text with suggestive allusions to early twentieth century modernist works. Woolfian passages such as “all of a sudden bang! Something breaks. Then you have to stop and put the pieces together again. But you never can put them back together quite the same way” (Gaddis 114) are constantly juxtaposed with Joycean epiphanic breakthroughs—“when I saw it [a Picasso] all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, reality free into reality that we never see, you never see it” (Gaddis 93)—all of which nurture in the reader’s mind the comfortable sensation that Gaddis is working on well-trodden paths.

Salemi is quick to underline this modernist narrative pattern as well—“the structure of Gaddis’ novel symbolizes voyage and return, dislocation and reestablishment, lost recognitions and found” (Salemi 8)—but perhaps the most explicit

configurations of such motifs are to be found in either Christian or Gnostic readings of *The Recognitions*. “In Gnosticism”, Cunningham writes, “the ontological moments of this struggle [Wyatt’s] are mapped out narratively in myths of fall and redemption. The structure of these myths involves, first, an origin in perfection and unity; then a falling away from that state [...] separation and alienation; then, a descent [...] into ignorance and delusion [...] then, a call [...] to recognition of one’s own true present inner nature” (Cunningham 623). The better part of the novel, as well as its main ‘plot’—to the extent that *The Recognitions* can be said to have a plot—appears, on first inspection, to work in accordance with the former narrative structuring. Disillusioned and disheartened by his inability to express the true patterns of life on canvas, Wyatt will yield to the influences of Brown, a businessman, and Valentine, an art collector, with whom he will initially work to restore and then later forge several counterfeits of the old masters. However, even in these crisis points, Wyatt’s work still subscribes to a realist project. When Wyatt forges, his counterfeit products are anything but ‘fake’. Considered from a Platonic perspective, the act of copying an original is precisely what is necessary in order to achieve a heightened sense of reality. To affirm the immutability of an authentic, essential pattern, and to then re-enact this pattern, instead of straying away from it in a desperate search for originality, is to be real. To give just one example from the text, when Wyatt sets out to produce a counterfeit of Fra Angelico and Brown is shocked at his inability to finish the painting despite his genius, Wyatt shouts back: “Do you know why I could never paint one, paint a Fra Angelico? Do you know why? Do you know how he painted? Fra Angelico down on his knees, he was on his knees and his eyes full of tears when he painted Christ on the Cross. And do you think I ... do you think I ...” (Gaddis 238). Thus, in the midst of artificiality and counterfeit, Wyatt is nevertheless at pains to transcend his condition. Once again, a final reappropriation of the real is hinted at, one which would complete the modernist narrative pattern critics have pointed towards: “[...] do you know how I feel sometimes?” Wyatt adds, “[...] as though I were reading a novel, yes. And then, reading it, but the hero fails to appear, fails to be working out some plan of comedy or, disaster?” (Gaddis 258). The pattern is there, the plan is laid out.

The shortcomings of such readings of *The Recognitions* emerge, however, when the latter parts of the novel are considered. At his lowest point in the narrative, Wyatt

comes to realize, in a bout of apparent nihilism and despair, that authenticity—regardless of its being understood in the modernist or in the Platonic sense—might simply not exist: “And if what I've been forging does not exist? And if I ... if I, I...” (Gaddis 374). No longer seeking redemption in aesthetics, he will then return to his father, a minister, in order to reappropriate the real in traditional ways—a religion, *the* religion, which he had long since abandoned. A series of epiphanies, or recognitions, will then ensue, against the backdrop of a double return, to which I cannot possibly do full justice here, but which, for the purposes of this analysis, are nevertheless essential to mention. Firstly, while at his father's house, Wyatt is struck by the obscure words spoken to him by another character: “No love is lost” (Gaddis 432). Reinfused with an ecstatic love for life, Wyatt returns to the city where, standing next to the corpses of Brown and Valentine, he will utter a second recognition: “yes, thank God there was the gold to forge!” (Gaddis 675). Finally, on a second, and final return to the city—this time from a convent in Spain where he had secluded himself—Wyatt will formulate his final, conclusive recognition, which deserves quotation in full:

If once you're started in living, you're born into sin, then? And how do you atone? By locking yourself up in remorse for what you might have done? Or by living it through. By locking yourself up in remorse with what you know you have done? Or by going back and living it through. By locking yourself up with your work, until it becomes a gessoed surface, all prepared, clean and smooth as ivory? Or by living it through. By drawing lines in your mind? Or by living it through. If it was sin from the start, and possible all the time, to know it's possible and avoid it? Or by living it through ... to have lived it through, and live it through, and deliberately go on living it through ... Now at last, to live deliberately (Gaddis 873-6).

Of the first recognition quoted above, very little, if not nothing, has been written, despite its being what I consider to be the single most powerful sentence in the novel. In a subsequent part of this reading I will extensively analyse its implications; for now, however, suffice it to point out that in proclaiming ‘no love is lost’, it is not simply a question of completing the modernist quest. Rather, in a decisive and ecstatic fashion, this brief utterance entirely cancels the whole point, the entire crisis of modernism. If

nothing of value is ever lost, then searches for depth and meaning are futile at best and detrimental at worst. A modernist reading, then, working with the assumption that something is indeed lost, to then configure a search for some sense of an epiphanic redemption, cannot accommodate this recognition. Much the same can be said of Wyatt's second recognition. In their analysis of it, Cunningham astutely points out that Gaddis' use of alchemical imagery (the forging of gold) is meant to suggest a possible "[...] alchemical redemption of matter" (Cunningham 622). Yet this redemption simply never emerges. By the end of the novel, Wyatt will never actually 'forge' authentic, pure gold—he will never paint an original work. "Gaddis", Cunningham then goes on to write, "[...] tends to return to [an] original pessimistic valuation" (Cunningham 628). How is it possible that a recognition Gaddis himself considered to be quintessential to the economy of the novel<sup>6</sup> should merely crumble into so many nihilist non-resolutions? All we are left with, as the novel draws to a close, is Wyatt's paradoxically enthusiastic return to the city, along with his third and final recognition. Of this finale too, critics have almost unanimously concluded that it is indecisive, inert, and nihilistic. Wilkens argues that "The Recognitions [...] refuses (or fails) explicitly to embody or schematize the shift [away from modernism]" (Wilkens 2-3) and again that "[...] the novel can at best signal the inadequacy of its own response" (Wilkens 18). With respect to Wyatt's search for redemption, Koenig writes: "[...] he never explicitly finds it. This brought from some reviewers the charge of nihilism" (Koenig 5). Finally, Cunningham too refuses to consider the three recognitions as redemptive: "Wyatt leaves the book with awkward abruptness just at the end of his "recognitions" and before the beginning of his real communions" (Cunningham 635).

What all of the interpretations surveyed above have in common is a fundamentally modernist lens. In reading Gaddis, these critics look for a 'solution' to something 'broken', and search for a recognition of something lost. Failing to find it, their only reasonable conclusion is nihilistic. But there is absolutely nothing nihilistic about any of the formerly quoted passages from *The Recognitions*. Each word there is infused with an intensity willing to affirm life as it is, to go back to it again and again, to live deliberately. Though the narrative pattern of aesthetic redemption one expects to

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<sup>6</sup> "[...] that is very much the key line to the whole book," Gaddis declares in a 1987 interview with Zoltán Abádi-Nagy with respect to Wyatt's alchemical revelation.

find in the novel fails towards the end, redemption is nonetheless defiantly present. Modernist lenses simply cannot accommodate this type of resolution. Another frame must be found.

If early criticism of *The Recognitions* is repeatedly frustrated by the novel's refusal to provide redemption through authenticity, postmodern readings select precisely this refusal as their starting point. The most thorough and illuminating instance of such a reading is Johnston's 1990 book-length study of Gaddis' work, around which this part of my article will revolve. In his *Carnival of Repetition*, Johnston heavily draws from Deleuzian texts—primarily *Difference and Repetition*—in order to showcase the extent to which *The Recognitions* prefigures precisely the type of conceptual revolution Deleuze would later theorize. Namely, Johnston writes, "*The Recognitions* points to what can now be postulated as the most important conceptual shift underlying postmodern reconfiguration: the reversal of the Platonic heritage and the counter assertion of the logic of the simulacrum" (Johnston 192). Briefly, Deleuze's thesis in the above-mentioned text has to do with a struggle against traditional images of thought grounded in distinct, authentic, Platonic ideas. That concepts of difference and repetition should be secondary, only ever derived from a deeper-yet sense of identity is, to Deleuze, deeply regrettable. Building on this, Johnston attempts to trace in *The Recognitions* a gradual disintegration of eternal identities juxtaposed by an emergence of pure simulacra, repetitions and differences which no longer point towards their authentic originals. Throughout the novel, in its plethora of counterfeit paintings, inauthentic personalities, second-rate attitudes, and superficial resolutions, Johnston thus discovers "a simultaneous loosening up, if not a dissolution, of exactly those points of condensation where value is centralized" (Johnston 16). Understood in this manner, the novel's narrative pattern, previously configured in a modernist way as a fall from grace coupled by the expectation of redemption, now turns into a gradually rising vector, whereby the more entrenched life becomes in the artificial fabric of art and money, the more liberated everything becomes. As Johnston writes, "*The Recognitions* participates in this emergent postmodernism by giving free play to forces working within or underneath representation" (Johnston 184). The emphasis on 'free play', on freedom, is crucial here. In a programmatically post-structuralist turn, what had previously been conceptualized as a loss, as a negative, and as a lack of essential truths,



now becomes an affirmative, energetic force which revitalizes the entire landscape painted by Gaddis. To this end, perhaps the most illustrative scene from the novel occurs at its very end, when Stanley, much like Wyatt a struggling artist, plays his tune on an organ inside an old church so powerfully, that the entire building collapses. In that moment, Gaddis beautifully writes, “the walls quivered, still he did not hesitate. Everything moved, and even falling, soared in atonement” (Gaddis 933). Crystallized in this passage, I would argue, is the very essence of a post-structuralism which dissolves binomials such as ‘false-real’ and ‘up-down’. The further one goes in a direction, the more they advance towards its very opposite. As things collapse, as concepts break down, and as authenticity is dissolved, they also rise, affirming a ‘true’ life paradoxically modulated by artificiality. Redemption from artificiality, then, stems precisely from the inauthentic, and the way up, the apparatus for flight, is obtained only from collapse, from a downfall.

All of the above can happen, for Johnston, Deleuze, and Gaddis as well, owing to a fundamental transition from stasis to motion. In the beginning of the novel, even in the midst of a consumerist, capitalist life defined through the circulation of money and counterfeit art, Wyatt is frozen in place, stuck searching for an immutable truth. It is the stability of recognition which he longs for. By the end, however, redemption is obtained from the opposite end of the spectrum. “Everything moved” (Gaddis 933), Gaddis writes—everything flows, circulates, energetically coursing through the artificial fabric of America. The ice of identity having thawed, the efforts of Wyatt no longer oriented towards the recognition of that frozen ideal, he is now free to move. Even if his life is second-rate, even if he is a counterfeiter, his life may now be redeemed by this underlying intensity pouring through it all. An intact, towering church, vertically pointing towards the essential, is stuck. Deleuze notes this lack too: “Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference ... It mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing” (Deleuze 56). A collapsing church, however, even though losing its truths, gains the energetic motion without which life itself is negated: “... the obscure zone of an intoxication which will never be calmed” (Deleuze 280). Such intoxicated, obscure zones of pure motion and no clear identity constantly emerge throughout the novel in Gaddis’ many descriptions of parties and social gatherings. Critics have

repeatedly pointed out the chaotic nature of these events<sup>7</sup>. Against an overwhelming backdrop of noise and commotion, words fly around, repeated and stolen, with no clear origin or destination, while characters interact with each other in artificial manners, all driven by superficial desires. In all this, it is extremely difficult to stabilize any consistent, meaningful narrative threads at such gatherings. Yet, perhaps most suggestive to the purposes of this analysis, is the manner in which Gaddis' parties end. If, to give just one emblematic counter-example, Woolf's final party in *Mrs. Dalloway* is configured for the emergence of a communal sense of life, a shared experience which unites all of the lost, shattered fragments of everyday life, *The Recognitions* goes in the exact opposite way. By the end of all social gatherings throughout the text, all characters are shown to drift away, dispersing in so many chaotic directions, with no clear end in sight. The only common ground for such heterogenous dispersals is dynamism—motion which further accelerates chaos, motion which fuels the deconstruction of all stable meaning. It is away from this process that Wyatt initially runs, and back to it, Johnston argues, that he eventually returns, having recognized its liberating potential.

What is Gaddis' final recognition, then? Read in the above terms, Wyatt's culminating decision of going back "at last, to live deliberately" (Gaddis 876) implies a resolution to return to artificial life not in order to fix it into place, but rather to further accelerate its movements. It implies a decision to return to art and to creation not in order to complete an original, authentic masterwork, but to further empower the intensities underlying every brushstroke, every line drawn, regardless of its 'authentic' status. For Johnston, thus, "*The Recognitions* trembles at the threshold of [a] «chaosmos»" (Johnston 131). It would appear, then, that Gaddis' novel calls for a 'fixing' of the world which is in fact a destruction of it. Yet, no matter how radically different, far removed such a postmodern view might seem from the previously surveyed modernist interpretations, it too ends up configuring a 'solution', an antidote of sorts which would alleviate Wyatt's struggles. In other words, both this post-structuralist reading and the previous modernist ones insist on the precarious and deplorable initial condition of the protagonist, from which he must eventually be redeemed. That one (modernism) finds it in an impossible representational transcendence while the other (post-structuralism)

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<sup>7</sup> See Johnston, Wilkens, and Tom McCarthy, "Introduction", in William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* (New York Review of Books, 2020) for such instances.

localizes the answer in conceptual deterritorializations is irrelevant—both eventually demand going from one ‘bad’ place to a final ‘good’ one. Such answers, I would argue, are ultimately incompatible with Gaddis’ text, throughout which the words “no love is lost” (Gaddis 432) echo loudly. I insist on this quote from *The Recognitions* precisely because it rejects either of the previous two readings. If nothing essential (love) is lost, then there should be no reason to change, to adopt another framework, to further mend or break the world. If nothing is lost, then at every point in the novel, everything is already, and has always been, perfect. Further yet, incompatibilities emerge in the case of Wyatt’s alchemical recognition as well. When he declares “thank God there was the gold to forge!” (Gaddis 675), Wyatt is thankful for the possibility of further forging the image, the identity of gold, and emphatically not for its possible deconstruction. Destructive postmodernism, an ecstatic intensification of conceptual disintegration, is not what Gaddis had in mind for his text. When, as the novel draws to a close, Wyatt returns from Spain, back into the city, his recognition is of another kind.

*The Recognitions* is configured along the circular lines of return. Yet it is neither a return to an original truth from which one has strayed, nor a rediscovery of intensities and deconstructed dynamisms underlying representations and structures. Up to this point, I have emphasized the inconsistencies in both the former, modernist, and of the latter, post-structuralist, readings of Gaddis’ novel. Now, I will attempt to provide an alternative frame, one which would insist that, every time Wyatt returns in the novel with the energy of new recognitions, he goes back to exactly the same world, in the exact same form he had previously abandoned it. Before scrutinizing the novel from this perspective, however, I will first sketch the theoretical ground on which I base my reading. If, in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari’s call for a radical deterritorialization<sup>8</sup>—both conceptual and otherwise—of any given structure based on the intensive flows and energies of capitalism, matches at least tentatively the direction in which Johnston’s previously mentioned interpretation of *The Recognitions* goes, Lyotard’s 1974 *Libidinal Economy* employs the same theoretical frame, but with completely different results and implications. On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari’s

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<sup>8</sup> Although the nature of capitalism always configures reterritorializations—that is, restructurings of everything deconstructed—for Deleuze and Guattari, the revolutionary path ultimately demands “to go still further, that is, in the movement of [...] decoding and deterritorialization [...] For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough” (Deleuze and Guattari 239)

desiring-machines—which they insist is not a metaphorical term and can be used to designate any given structure whatsoever—“... work only when they break down, and by continually breaking down” (Deleuze and Guattari 31). That is to say, the essential function of structures, paradoxically given by their very collapse, is the mobilization of freed intensities. Only a world in ruin, then, can be said to work properly—only there can one find real motion. On the other hand, Lyotard’s “libidinal dispositive”, which for the purposes of this analysis can be understood as a synonym for desiring-machines, “considered, precisely, as a stabilization and even a stasis or group of energetic stases is [...] a structure” (Lyotard, 26). Unlike in *Anti-Oedipus*, this stasis does not pose any significant issues: “Eros can live happily together with Logos” (Lyotard 27). Which is to say, the principle of love, energy, and intensity, can be found to already inhabit the stable construct, without any fundamental need for liberation—simply put, there is love in everything. Thus, Lyotard writes, “[...] it is in no way a matter of determining a new domain, another field, beyond representation which would be immune to the effects of theatricality [...] We evacuate nothing, we stay in the same place, we occupy the terrain of signs” (Lyotard 50). By no means is Lyotard the only post-structuralist thinker to argue this—other influential voices, such as Baudrillard, or Foucault, could easily accommodate such a frame. Certainly, to give just one example, selecting Baudrillard’s *Simulations and Simulacra* as a conceptual ground would have led this analysis to the exact same conclusions. What distinguishes Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy*, however, as well as what prompted me into restricting this analysis to this work alone, is the stylistic—as opposed to merely the conceptual—force with which artificiality is championed. There is an aesthetic of consumerism in *Libidinal Economy* which, I would argue, perfectly fits Gaddis’ novel; and what this rhetoric does best is to emphasize that, in the above-quoted passage on the impossibility of escape, nothing is essentially lost: “Isn’t fetishism an opportunity for intensities? Were not Einstein’s most artistic inventions also driven by this desire, by the conviction that God, as he said, certainly does not play dice?” (Lyotard 111). And further yet—in a vein which would be later heavily criticized but which has since only become more relevant alongside capitalism’s global expansion—“you dare not say the only important thing there is to say, that one can enjoy swallowing the shit of capital” (Lyotard 116). In all of the above, what abounds are structures: artificial, superficial, second-rate—the “shit” of today’s world. Yet what

courses through them all is pure intensity—the energy of going to the mall, the love of reading a bad book, the ecstasy of forging counterfeit paintings. There is always a maximum of motion even in the most static of structures. “And what is lost in all of this?” Lyotard asks—“Nothing at all” (Lyotard 111).

“No love is lost” (Gaddis 432). Two decades before Lyotard’s text, in a novel set against the backdrop of emerging capitalist and consumerist artificiality, Gaddis subtly anticipates the theorization of all the love which, despite everything, mobilizes even the shallow waters of American mass-culture. In the introduction to the 2020 edition of *The Recognitions*, McCarthy points towards this burgeoning American way: “Everyone repeats everyone else’s quips, rethinks their thoughts. Even their problems are “plagiarisms” of each other’s. The text itself, right at the level of the sentence, turns at times into a kind of pastiche in which all actions and words are secondhand” (McCarthy ix). Yet he too notices in *The Recognitions* a pervasive celebration of the above-mentioned consumerist lifestyle. By the end of the novel, McCarthy writes, “Recognition is not the same as authenticity; nor is it the same as any other type of resolution or transcendence” (McCarthy xviii). Instead, “Wyatt delivers, his own counter-doctrine, claiming that the ultimate pilgrim trajectory [goes] [...] back out into the world, compelled to navigate and recognize its multiples and replications all over again” (McCarthy xix). Such is the extent of the return my reading revolves around. At any given point throughout the novel, within every plagiarized manuscript or canvas, and at every party full of shallow individuals, there is a profound recognition to be met—that nothing, or at the very least no love, is lost in anything, and that it is only a matter of recognizing, of seeing it all in the new terms of energy, and not the old ones of authenticity. In reaching such conclusions, we are still located within the theoretical boundaries of a post-structuralist reading. Johnston too points towards the dissipation of the ‘real-fake’ binomial and towards the emergence of the logic of simulacra. What my *Libidinal Economy*-inspired reading does, however, is to reject the necessity of deconstructionism, of the intensification of chaos and collapses. Read in this manner, Wyatt’s alchemical celebration—“Yes, thank God there was the gold to forge!” (Gaddis 675)—becomes much more nuanced. Not only is this resounding ‘yes’ an affirmation of the creation of structures, of persistent patterns and of significant forms, but it is also an acceptance of those forms too which function along traditional lines. To forge gold is to

presume transcendence, or at least the possibility thereof. In a consumerist world in which Wyatt is acutely aware of the artificial status everything, including gold, bears, he is nonetheless immensely thankful even for the creation of such illusions of transcendence. In other words, he is thankful for the most ‘harmful’ of artificial constructs too, namely for those which claim to be true. Not just the logic of simulacra, then, but the more traditional logic of every representation, is present here. Such an all-encompassing ‘yes’ can make no sense unless one is ready to embrace all the love and all the energy, regardless of its superficial source. Finally, it is the same, loving ‘yes’ which permeates Wyatt’s last recognition, previously quoted in full. “And how do you atone?” (Gaddis 872) asks Wyatt. Even before the answer is given, we are already situated comfortably within the artificial, religious experience of sin and redemption. And is there something lost in such a return to traditional forms? Far from it. “If it was sin from the start, and possible all the time, to know it's possible and avoid it? Or by living it through [...], to have lived it through, and live it through, and deliberately go on living it through” (Gaddis 873). The longing for an escape—irrespective of its being modernist or post-structuralist in nature—is promptly replaced here with the far more ecstatic immersion within the already present energies of the same old structures. In the end, as both Lyotard and Gaddis suggest, one must return to artificial constructs, learn to live them through, and in doing so, do them justice. This, I would argue, is the full extent of Gaddis’ re-cognitions.

Bearing all of the above in mind, I will now move on to analyse one of the several mechanisms through which *The Recognitions* not only formulates the idea of a redemptive quality of artificiality, but also enacts it. Much more than a simple metaphorical or allegorical discussion of concepts, Gaddis’ work configures an actual performance, under the reader’s eyes, of everything previously considered. One way in which such a performance is configured is through the use of myth and religion. Though Gaddis’ employment of mythology throughout *The Recognitions* has been repeatedly commented upon<sup>9</sup>, such analyses have generally tended to apply a modernist lens to their readings, associating, for example, Gaddis’ methods to Joycean ones in *Ulysses*. That is to say, the critical consensus has been that *The Recognitions* adopts narrative

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<sup>9</sup> See Cunningham for a Gnostic and Mithraic reading, and Koenig for a discussion of the novel’s Christian roots.

and formal patterns of myths by hollowing them of their original meanings and content, to then implant them with novel, cosmopolitan, and subversive material. Thus, the argument would be that Gaddis draws upon the original, early-medieval text—*The Clementine Recognitions*—attributed to St. Clement which, in the novel, Valentine describes as “Mostly talk, talk, talk. The young man’s deepest concern is for the immortality of his soul ... It’s been referred to as the first Christian novel” (Gaddis 366), to then trace in Wyatt’s own quest a similar, yet simultaneously subverted, journey for redemption. However, as I have hopefully shown by now, *The Recognitions* thoroughly rejects such narrative patterns. And even if it did not, to make of myth a mere background, or a simple underlying structure ordering an otherwise chaotic narrative, would be to greatly underestimate its impact in Gaddis’ text.

Myth serves another purpose in this novel. Its role is to emanate energy and love despite its being considered ‘fake’, or outdated. It inhabits the text as a living proof of the legitimacy of the artificial. All throughout *The Recognitions*, Gaddis litters his text with mythological input. Be they Biblical, Gnostic, or informed by the Sun-worshipping cult of Mithraism, these allusions and tropes appear consistently from beginning to end. Initially, Wyatt moves away from all of them in his own search for authentic being and aesthetic creation—he considers religion artificial, unsatisfactory, as having missed the essential things in and of life. By the end of the novel, as previously argued, he will return to the artificial once more, this time ready to embrace it and its redemptive potential. Gaddis’ genius, however, lies in only partially affirming Wyatt’s thinking. At his lowest points in the novel, the protagonist comes to recognize the shallow quality of everything around him. From one end of the spectrum—consumerist America—to the other—Gwyon’s Mithraic and Gnostic delusions—Wyatt dejectedly denounces it all: “preach to them, my evil heart [...] tell them [...] that what they have been forging all this time never existed” (Gaddis 377-8). Yet, in that very same chapter’s closing lines, Gaddis chooses to insert a mythical passage which imposes a presence rather than an absence, a sense of metaphysical truth and essence, which by all accounts, including Wyatt’s, should not exist:

Few anywhere disagreed, but that the sun and the moon and the planets issued from a hole in the east, descended into one in the west, and returned, by night, through a

subterranean passage ... Thrown open, the gates on the eastern face of the temple meet the dawn as the golden tips of the obelisks burn, and the red rim appears from the underworld. Those on earth prostrate before it, and the gates close upon Baal, Who has entered His Temple (Gaddis 381).

What has happened here? On the one hand, through Wyatt's resolutions, the novel deconstructs and emphasizes the artificial status of myth. On the other, it lays claim to a profound, burning energy, capable of transcendence, within the very myth it had formerly collapsed. In such a paradoxical relationship between the fake and the intense, Lyotard's arguments are subtly anticipated. Fake and sacrilegious though they may be, these myths create a sense of depth which has no interest in any so-called 'reality' factor. It will take several hundreds of pages for this aporetic tension to dissolve, for Wyatt to re-cognize myth, among others, and for artificiality to be redeemed. But even before that can happen, Gaddis' text infuses what can only be reasonably understood as not true (myth itself being at core a story, a fictive account) with an intensity which, despite its 'fake' status, towers over the reader. The idea is not there yet to apprehend, not quite spelled out, but still *The Recognitions* sustains an unspoken energy in myth that intimates a yet-to-come, impactful recognition. Many other such instances can be traced in the novel. To give just one more example, Gwyon's religious affinities rapidly degenerate as the text progresses. Initially a sensible minister, preaching reasonable Christian teachings, Wyatt's father ends up immersed in obscure, Mithraic (or at the very least Gnostic) settings: he boards up the church, throws away the Bible, worships the Sun at sermons, and so on. Eventually, he is dismissed by his community and replaced as a minister. Nevertheless, all those blasphemous, decidedly false sermons bear their mark: "But don't you know", somebody comments, "there was something [there] [...] She sniffed. Something" (Gaddis 700). All of which conspicuously begs the question—why, if it is all so blatantly untrue, so outrageously sacrilegious, does it produce so much intensity? Once again, the answer, affirming, in a Lyotardian manner, the genuine value of even the second-rate construct, is yet to come. But the novel does not only care for concrete formulations—its interest, rather, lies in the performance of intensity and of energy. That, in the end, it makes us recognize the redemptive potential of artificiality is secondary. Essential is that one might feel love in shallow patterns even



before they know it, or before they learn to see it. Such is the function of myth in *The Recognitions*.

To conclude, throughout this article I have attempted to emphasize the extent to which Gaddis' *The Recognitions* champions the innate, redeeming quality of artificial constructs. From the shallowest of consumerist cultural products to the more complex, yet inevitably frustrated aesthetic efforts to achieve authenticity, I have argued that Gaddis ultimately mounts a thorough defence—and emphatically not a critique—of everything fake, by advocating a return to it as the only proper course of action. In supporting this claim, the present article has initially reviewed both modernist and post-structuralist readings of *The Recognitions*, to then underline their failure to do justice to key episodes in the text. Subsequently, drawing primarily on Lyotard's unique postmodern treatment of artificiality, I have attempted to construct a different interpretation of Gaddis' novel, one which would affirm all the positivity and the vibrant energy *The Recognitions* undeniably imbues artificiality with. Finally, this interpretation has stressed the manner in which Gaddis is never content with simply conveying the former ideas and concepts, but rather configures his text such as to actually produce the feeling of intensity through myth. Thus, in light of everything said before, I return to my initial question—recognize what, exactly? —, to give the following answer: the only thing to recognize in this novel is the immense potential of the same old persistent patterns, and of all (in)significant forms, regardless of their counterfeit, artificial nature; and the only thing to do is to return to them, again and again, since no love will ever be lost.

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